

Arubian Nights

By Islands Staff Dec. 21, 2006



I ended up here, gripping the side of a millions-of-years-old hunk of coral wall in Aruba at 10:30 p.m. because I've got a big mouth. Just a few minutes earlier, I had made the mistake of remarking (give or take a few words) to Eddy Croes, an Arubian who is part Dutch, part African, part samurai (he is a master of kendo) that "I get bored on walks."

As we bumped along a granite-washboard road in his Land Rover deep into Arikok National Park on the north coast of Aruba, I filled Eddy in on my walking philosophy: "I mean, I get the whole peaceful nature thing. But I like a little challenge, or I get bored." Eddy is co-owner of Aruba Nature Sensitive Hikers. Sensitive, he defined, "as in how you experience nature. You must engage the five senses on my hikes."

Not only does he engage the senses, but he uses the approximately 40-minute road trip — a relatively flat journey from the very bright and busy high-rise hotel zone, passing through Dutch villages with adobe homes to the vast emptiness and darkness of the desert — as a way to get to know his customers so he can tailor-make an Arubian adventure.

As we drove into the desert-like park that night onto unpaved roads, he turned off his headlights so I could see just what a force of light the full moon is. Without artificial illumination, I could clearly make out the sentinel-like forms of candle cacti, mesquite trees and the infamous tree of the ABC islands (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao), the gnarled divi-divi, bending over backwards as if gasping for air.

Most people who visit Aruba, just 15 miles from Venezuela's coastline, never see this north side. They stay in one of two hotel zones, and who can blame them? There, on the island's west coast, the

Caribbean beaches are calm and turquoise, and the sand is as soft as 1,000-threadcount sheets. At night these beach-goers tend to head to the casinos and, on the rare occasion when they get sick of the beach or the even rarer occasion when it rains, they might shop in Oranjestad, the capital. If they want the back story, they visit the Aruba Historical Museum, housed in an old Dutch watchtower — the Fort Zoutman and Willem III Tower built in 1796 — to learn about Dutch and African influences on the island as well as the history of gold mining and aloe making.

I, too, spent days swimming, unsuccessfully deciphering the local Papiamentu language and visiting the historical museum. But when I heard that I could walk the desert in the dark, I acted. It sounded eerie. I phoned Eddy. He said he'd pick me up at my hotel, The Westin Aruba Resort, at 9:30 that very evening.

"If you're lucky," Eddy noted then, "you'll even get to see a rattlesnake."

Lucky? "I was hoping I'd see something more like an owl," I replied.

At around 10:15 p.m., Eddy and I parked near Boca Prins, an inlet in the park, to begin our walk without flashlights. We took the man-made steps at Boca Prins down to its bay and then walked across the sand to the aforementioned coral wall, which had, stuck within its bottom layers, conch shells, brain coral, various shellfish and something glittery that in the dark I fancifully imagined to be gold.

There are no man-made steps here, so Eddy climbed and I followed, scaling the coral, its rough crevices abrading my palms. Granted, it isn't a big rock, and we eventually emerge onto higher (and horizontal) ground. I realize then that Eddy has given me exactly what I wanted: a challenge. So I give him what he wants: I begin paying attention to my senses. A slight breeze cools my skin. The sea salt in the air is so thick that I hear it, if that's possible. What I definitely hear, though, is a tittering, and I see little shadows. I can't make them out — what are those? "Rattlesnakes?" I ask, quick to imagine the scariest boogeyman of all.

"Land crabs," Eddy says. But I'm quickly distracted from sound to sight: Before me in the lunar glow is a 30-foot-high sand dune. I sense (I am using the sixth one now) another challenge underway.

"How are we going to get around that?" I ask.

He demonstrates by putting one foot in front of the other: walking, albeit slowly, as he sinks at every step, scaling the dunes of the Aruban desert. Grit flies in my face. I crunch on it. Ah, taste.

The nice thing about the desert at night, I decide as I make slow progress, is the temperature. I had toured Arikok one day, near noon, and had almost fallen to my knees as I walked from my car to one of its natural bridges to peek at the Caribbean Sea. It seemed like I was standing much closer than 12 degrees north of the equator. The only coolness I felt that day was in the nearby Tunnel of Love, a network of caves with dripping stalactites.

I stop my uphill hike to take a deep breath, to inhale this unusual sea desert. Salt, strong and heavy. A humid desert.

"You're not talking about hiking anymore on this walk," Eddy remarks as we stand there, sniffing.

"It's the wind, the sea and the influence of the moon. You are recharging." He breathes in the oxygen.

The view is magnificent on the other side of the dune. The sea whips against the coastline, and giant boulders of tonalite and basalt protect the island. The moon hangs overhead.

I think of early discovery and wonder if this is what Aruba looked like when the Caquetio Indians arrived or when the Spanish came in 1499, leaving long before the gold they were seeking was eventually found in 1824. I somehow feel connected to early life as I stand here. I think of their fertile imaginations, seeing this desert and thinking of calling it home. I'm proposing that they saw the beach side first because, let's face it, it's definitely more welcoming. That's when I discover another sense: one that is most readily felt in the dark, one that should be activated often because it gives us the courage for possibility, like explorers: the seventh sense, I shall call it. The imagination. Indeed, maybe the explorers had arrived in the dark!

"Do you hear that?" Eddy asks me. He's down on his hands and knees, approaching a grove of sea grapes. A tern flits by. Or is it an owl? Eddy's walk has successfully engaged all my seven senses.

Read More: <https://www.islands.com/arubian-nights/>